

VZCZCXR07926
PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR
DE RUEHKU #0925/01 2601134
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 171134Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3957
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 KUWAIT 000925

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP, NEA/RA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/16/2019

TAGS: PREL PINR PGOV KU

SUBJECT: GROWING SOCIAL AND SECTARIAN DIVISIONS SPARK
QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL CONTRACT WITH AL SABAH

REF: A. KUWAIT 903

- 1B. KUWAIT 876
- 1C. KUWAIT 812
- 1D. KUWAIT 504
- 1E. KUWAIT 623
- 1F. KUWAIT 244
- 1G. KUWAIT 793

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (S) As Kuwait emerges from the Ramadan quiet season and prepares for the October re-convening of the National Assembly (Parliament), Kuwaitis are expressing widespread dissatisfaction over the quality of the country's leadership, malaise over social tensions and frustration with a perceived drop in the quality of the country's social and material infrastructure; many are also concerned by a perceived increase in sectarian tensions and tribalist agendas.

Potshots exchanged in the press over the summer by Kuwait's various factions suggest no let-up in the social and political divide between those who view themselves as a progressive elite, Islamists, tribalists, and even the ruling family. Concerned by the public mood, the Amir delivered a Ramadan speech on September 13 somewhat plaintively appealing for unity and media self-restraint and urging citizens to guard against tribal and sectarian divisions. Recent Embassy Ramadan-season soundings of Kuwaiti opinion-leaders suggest that:

-- Panic over H1N1, the GOK's perceived mishandling of a massive sewage spill, and shock over a disastrous wedding fire have further eroded an already low public confidence that Kuwait's political leadership can cooperate to prevent or effectively manage crises. Factionalism and non-national loyalties have as a consequence become more openly apparent -- and in some cases are likely being stoked by competing elements within the Al Sabah family who are jockeying for position. Conservative Sunnis claim the Amir is pandering to Shi'a, parliamentarians who may be more moderate and pliable; many Shi'a in turn worry about alleged under the table ruling family patronage of Salafists.

-- Criticism of the Amir -- albeit muted because it remains technically illegal -- has increased, with observers of all stripes faulting him for retaining a weak PM, placing family above national interests, and for turning a blind eye to pervasive corruption.

-- Largely absent from the media tumult between empowered and assertive Islamist and tribal politicians (many MPs) and liberal commentators (many from the professional classes -- Kuwait University professors and ex-ministers) have been the prominent leaders and scions of the country's main-line business families (both Sunni and Shi'a), who while well aware of the dangers of continued political gridlock have nonetheless chosen not to place their huge influence on one

side or the other lest their broader business interests be affected.

-- The oft-maligned Prime Minister, along with several other cabinet members may be targeted for questioning ("grilling") in upcoming parliamentary sessions. The Amir has instructed the ministers "to not be afraid" to answer their detractors, but has promised them no safety net.

-- Despite parliamentary elections in May that brought in a number of more moderate parliamentarians (including four women), some of the most outspoken critics of the government were returned, leading most Kuwaitis to expect that the Fall parliamentary season will be a volatile one, with few positive outcomes.

End summary.

Public Confidence at Low Ebb

¶2. (S) During the long hot month of Kuwait's Ramadan season, Kuwaitis have gathered in their diwaniyyas to reflect on and debate their country's condition and its future. Extensive Embassy discussions with Kuwaitis ranging across the political spectrum have revealed a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with their country's political leadership and lack of a mobilizing social vision. A series of summertime crises -- panic over H1N1 deaths (ref A), a catastrophic sewage spill in an urban district (ref B), and a tragic wedding party fire that claimed dozens of lives (ref C) -- have heightened many Kuwaitis' sense of malaise and led them

KUWAIT 00000925 002 OF 005

to worry that there's no capable hand on the country's tiller. At the same time, many Kuwaitis perceive a hardening of sectarian and tribal differences as Kuwait's various social groupings -- manipulated to some degree by competing factions within the ruling family -- maneuver for increased power and influence.

¶3. (S) In an August incident that played itself out in the press and which revealed an unexpected degree of Shia-Sunni tension, associates of a Kuwaiti Shia cleric (Sayed Mohammed Al-Mohri) criticized one of Kuwait's most respected Sunni scholars (Ibn Taymiya). Subsequently, a Salafi weekly magazine published a cartoon of a white shark wearing a black turban, which many Shia took to be an offensive caricature of Al-Mohri. The magazine denied that the caricature was intended to represent Al-Mohri, stating that it represented, instead, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard navy. Following a volley of angry back and forth press commentary between members of the two religious communities, Minister of Oil and Communication Shaykh Ahmed Abdullah Al Sabah (acting on behalf of the absent Amir) called on editors of all Kuwait's media to avoid instigating sectarianism.

¶4. (S) While the issue submerged, diwaniyya conversations suggest lingering distrust between the two communities. Sectarian tensions were further exacerbated by the arrest by the local security service of a number of Kuwaiti Salafist/Takfirist extremists planning attacks on US and Kuwaiti interests, which prompted a short but sharp period of introspection and finger-pointing as Kuwaiti commentators variously blamed the government for promoting Sunni religious extremism in the schools and mosques, parents for not exercising more oversight over the upbringing of their children, and again the government for not doing more to prevent the intrusion of unIslamic values and policies which led to a back-lash by some in society.

Ministers Operating without a Net

¶5. (S) High on the list of Kuwaiti concerns is the expectation that the upcoming parliamentary season will do

little to push the country in a positive direction. Despite early hopes of some liberals that an era of greater cooperation between the legislative and executive branches might have emerged from the May elections (ref D) in which four women broke the parliamentary gender barrier, continuing political posturing by MPs over the summer has led most Kuwaitis to doubt that the current crop of MPs will rise above self-serving agendas to act in the interests of Kuwait.

There is a widespread expectation on all sides that the Islamist/tribalist opposition will continue to mount attacks on the Prime Minister and several of his ministers with "irresponsible" (in the view of the elite liberal class) demands that the government absorb private consumer debt and expand healthcare services abroad for Kuwaitis.

¶6. (S) Notably absent from the agenda, in the view of many Kuwaiti "progressives" will be long overdue dialogue on labor reforms, TIP, counterterrorism, and healthcare and education reform. In a climate that promises to be contentious, Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al Sabah, nodding to the Minister of Interior's successful staving off of grilling attacks in June (ref E), has publicly encouraged cabinet members to "not be afraid of grilling." This admonition is intended to spark the ministers' senses of ownership in their portfolios, but leaves open the question of whether the government will provide them a safety net. Fearing scapegoatism, ministers have historically proved disinclined to embark on initiatives that might subject them to public or parliamentary scrutiny. It remains an open question whether the Amir's remarks will encourage Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al Sabah himself to face his detractors; he has avoided such an encounter in his last six attempts to run the government.

Rx: Strong Dose of Leadership

¶7. (S) Embassy's interlocutors have been virtually unanimous in attributing at least part of the blame on the country's present woes to the weak leadership of the PM, a man whom most Kuwaitis view as a decent man, but one lacking in steel or vision. In what is a relatively new phenomenon, however, some Kuwaitis are taking the added step of putting some blame for the country's sense of drift on the shoulders of the Amir. Since open criticism of the Amir continues to be illegal, such reflections are muted and often expressed only in private, but the sense of public frustration over the

KUWAIT 00000925 003 OF 005

Amir's decision to retain his ineffectual nephew Shaykh Nasser in the PM slot hangs in the air. Adding to many Kuwaitis' frustration is the belief that even if Shaykh Nasser were to stand down, the ruling Al Sabah family has few viable alternative candidates and some more perceptive observers note that political gridlock is exacerbated by the competing factions within the ruling family -- principally among the Amir, the PM, Deputy Prime Minister Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahad Al Sabah, and the Amir's half-brother Shaykh Mish'al (with a sprinkling of overt and covert financial and political manipulation by the Amir's two surviving sons, Nasser and the shadowy Hamad). While many Kuwaiti thinkers would like to see a competent and dynamic non-ruling family member appointed to the PM role, they realize that Al Sabah opposition and long tradition render such an outcome unlikely anytime soon.

Number One Out for Number One?

¶8. (S) In a quiet way, some Kuwaitis have begun to mutter that Kuwait's senior leadership is self-centered, as well as lacking in vision. By all accounts, the current Amir has proven to be something of a disappointment weighed against the expectations of someone reputed for his decisiveness over a nearly 40 year term as Foreign Minister. In conversation with Poloff, a respected Islamist academic recently

contrasted the image of the previous Amir, Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah, with that of his younger half-brother and current Amir, Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah. Our interlocutor noted that Shaykh Jaber, as Amir, reportedly lowered his "Amiri appropriations" salary from 11 to eight million KD/per year, whereas Shaykh Sabah, when he ascended to power in 2006, raised his Amiri appropriations from 11 to 50 million KD/year. (Note: In what some observers have suggested is a slight to Shaykh Sabah, Kuwaitis are increasingly festooning their car windows with images of the deceased but still venerated Shaykh Jaber. End note.) Such rare criticisms of the Amir are heard much more frequently about the PM, whose detractors are expected to try to grill him in the coming months over his office's large and less-than-transparent expenditures. Interestingly, given the political alliance and "social compact" forged decades ago between the Al Sabah and the Islamists and tribalists (ref F), it is these conservative elements who are at the forefront of corruption allegations against the GOK. While conservatives regularly assert that Kuwaiti leadership is corrupt, liberals generally focus their criticism on the fact that it is simply weak. (Note: In a rare assertion of authority, the Amir last month instructed the PM to sharply curtail his foreign travel given the numerous pressing issues at home. End note.)

National Loyalty only Skin Deep

¶9. (S) Many Kuwaiti observers view the present fractures in Kuwaiti political and social life as stemming from the failure of the mid-20th century social compact between the Al Sabah and the demographically growing Bedouin or tribal communities, which was intended to offset the political influence of the downtown merchant families (ref F). In exchange for tribalist support, the GOK offered them nationality and jobs in the police and army; the trend continues today with the government staffing the bureaucracies of several ministries with large numbers of tribals, many of whom are assessed by Kuwaiti liberals as having only limited qualifications. In the view of many observers, however, the tribals failed to respond to the ruling family's largesse with loyalty or with a sense of commitment to Kuwait as a nation. Instead, the tribes have increasingly focused their energies on expanding tribal political power with the aim of advancing specific tribal agendas, functioning as de facto political parties for the benefit of tribal members. While, as several observers suggested, Islam provides an important backdrop for the tribes and forms a core part of their identity, most of them are motivated more by a desire to enhance their particular niche in society than by a desire to spread fundamentalist Islam. When it has served their purposes, however, tribalists have not hesitated to ally themselves with fundamentalists, including Salafists and Islamists, such as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM-Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood) to advance their own interests.

Tipping the Balance: Strategizing for the future

¶10. (S) While many Kuwaiti liberals hoped that the results

KUWAIT 00000925 004 OF 005

of the May parliamentary elections presaged a more progressive period in Kuwaiti politics, many of those same interlocutors perceive a hardening and retrenching of Islamist and tribalist attitudes over the summer. For some, the May parliamentary setbacks of the "conservatives" resulted from infighting among these groups, rather than a significant shift towards a more liberal worldview among Kuwaiti voters. Indeed, the Islamist ICM recently elected a new Secretary General (former MP Dr. Nasser Al Sane) and claims it is regrouping along the lines of a modern political party. Islamists, including ICM and Salafi brethren, as well as tribalists, their natural allies (when expedient), will

likely remain the GOK's primary opposition in the upcoming season. This reality has led some Islamists, such as Nasser Al-Sane, to assert privately that the government is pandering to the 9 Shi'a MPs as a more moderate, cooperative force -- with a prominent Shi'a former MP recently telling DCM that in his view the Shi'a have never had it so good in Kuwait.

¶11. (S) Few Kuwaiti analysts view the May election as having inspired the country's various political and social factions to work towards a common goal. Instead, Sunnis, Shi'a, liberals, conservatives, Hadhar (settled), Bedouin, ruling family members and members of the press have carried out over the summer a continuing round of public and private skirmishes and maneuvers. In the view of many Kuwaiti analysts, loss of confidence in the country's leadership has exacerbated the tendency of Kuwait's various factions to dig in and strategize how best to advance their particular interests. While most Kuwaiti political analysts perceive the government's inability to bring the factions to brook as a sign of its ineptness, at least a few believe the Amir has subtly but deliberately encouraged parliamentary infighting (by simultaneously backing the PM and some of his rivals in the ruling family, particularly Deputy PM Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al Sabah) as a means to prejudice citizens against the parliament and sustain their dependence on the ruling family. Some believe, however, that this rivalry is temporarily on hold and that Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahad will play a useful role in advancing the GOK's long moribund development agenda in the upcoming Session (though his recent designation as chief government whip for the implementation of the GOK's parliamentary agenda is something of a double-edged sword in that he will grow in stature -- but only if he succeeds in what many see as an almost impossible task).

Divergent World Views

¶12. (S) Embassy conversations with policy analysts and political activists from a variety of Kuwait's political "tendencies" reveal a few overriding present preoccupations: Islamists, by and large, viewed the government as weak and corrupt and worry that the GOK's "pandering" to liberal, Shi'a and tribal elements has resulted in the non-transparent staffing of key ministries, permitting the infiltration of "misguided ideologies" that threaten Islam. Self-identified liberals agree in part, stating that the GOK's long-term "jobs-for-loyalty" social compact with demographically growing Islamist and tribalist groups has resulted in the staffing of several ministries -- including Education, Awqaf, Planning and even Foreign Affairs -- with poorly qualified Islamists/tribals, resulting in a decline in the GOK's ability to provide services. Liberals view as particularly corrosive to Kuwait's social fabric a perceived dominance by Islamists of the country's educational system, an outcome they believe has resulted in a generation of Kuwaitis who are much more Islamist in view than the previous generation, and are poorly educated, unprepared to compete in the modern world, and ready to turn a blind eye to the presence in Kuwait of dangerous elements. Liberals -- including many Shi'a -- blame the Islamists for promoting an intolerant version of Islam and criticize the government and ruling family for supinely giving the Islamists a free hand with the misguided and non-productive aim of securing Islamist loyalty and support.

Comment: Keeping the Dhow Afloat in the Storm

¶13. (S) Embassy's summertime conversations suggest a widespread sentiment shared by liberals and conservatives alike that Kuwaitis are dissatisfied with what they deem is weak, incompetent leadership. In charting the course for the future, the Amir must decide whether to continue his paternalistic consensus-oriented and passive-aggressive approach to leadership -- which many Kuwaitis view as the road to ruin -- or take on a "tough love" tack that involves

making some difficult, non-consensual decisions, which would break with long-established precedent in this small society of but 1.1 million citizens. Bailing out the waterlogged Kuwaiti dhow and getting it to sail on a faster and smoother course could require relinquishing a degree of ruling family influence and, perhaps, jettisoning ballast like the PM. But this would necessitate a firm governmental hand on the tiller -- currently not in evidence -- and better captaining would not necessarily calm the tensions between Islamists, tribals and liberals. Given the social and political storm clouds that have been gathering over the summer, the GOK could be heading into choppy seas this fall. However, with so many prominent and influential business families choosing to remain on the sidelines of the fractious national debate, it appears the smart money is betting this fall's likely political squall won't turn into a storm. End comment.

For more reporting from Embassy Kuwait, visit:
visit Kuwait's Classified Website at:

http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Kuwa_it

JONES